

## Race Collides With History In Effort to Rename School

By DAVID SCHARFENBERG

Tuesday April 15, 2003

A group of teachers and parents at Jefferson Elementary School are pushing to rename the building, citing concerns with Thomas Jefferson's slaveholding past. But critics, including some parents, call the move shortsighted.

"You want to put a hole in this guy who people hold up as a hero — who's going to be left?" said parent Mark Piccillo, annoyed at the renaming effort. "I pick my battles and this is one I'm going to fight."

First-grade teacher Marguerite Hughes said she's not interested in "Jefferson-bashing." But she said it would be insensitive to leave the name of a slaveholder on a building with a large black student population.

"I think it's important to think about how students feel about the school, and even teachers," said Hughes. "As an African American, it's not a small thing that Jefferson was a slaveowner."

To change the school name, proponents will have to get 20 percent of parents, 20 percent of staff and 20 percent of students to sign petitions pushing the idea. Once the community settles on a new name, a majority of each group will have to vote in favor of the change and win final approval from the Board of Education — a process likely to take at least a year.

District officials, wrestling with a major budget crisis, are not lining up behind the nascent movement.

"With the school district giving notices to 200 teachers, students of many cultures struggling to comprehend English and a community working hard to save programs in these difficult budget times, changing the name of a school site is not high on my list of priorities," said Superintendent Michele Lawrence in a statement. "Right now, our time would be better spent on these immediate issues."

Even school board Director Terry Doran, a progressive stalwart, is taking a wait-and-see attitude.

"I think it's appropriate to look at that, but I don't have strong enough feelings at this point to participate in a movement to change the name of the school," he said.

Robert Middlekauff, UC Berkeley professor emeritus of American history, said the legacy of Thomas Jefferson — slaveowner, Founding Father and author of the Declaration of Independence — is a complicated one.

“All historians and students recognize that Jefferson was a slaveholder, but they also recognize that he was one of many, and his life, his career, his contributions to the Revolution were of another order,” Middlekauff said. “I think Jefferson is generally held in very high regard.”

Philip Broaddus, parent of two children at the school, cited Jefferson’s contributions in defending the current name.

“They should give Jefferson more due for what he did,” said Broaddus. “I don’t think we’d even be having this conversation if Jefferson hadn’t included those inalienable rights in the Constitution.”

Piccillo noted that Martin Luther King, Jr., one of his heroes, was an adulterer and alleged plagiarist. King, he said, is still worthy of praise and the same should hold for Jefferson.

“I don’t think you can compare adultery and slaveholding,” Hughes replied, drawing a sharp distinction between personal failures and holding human beings in bondage.

“We’re not saying [Jefferson] can’t be people’s hero,” she continued. “All we’re saying is you can have that viewpoint with your life experiences, but I can’t do that, as an African American, with my life experience.”

If a name change goes through, Jefferson Elementary would not be the first Berkeley school to take on a new identity. A few years ago, parents and staff at Columbus Elementary School decided to rename the building Rosa Parks Elementary School and won board approval.

There wasn’t much controversy at the time over taking down the “Columbus” sign, but there was a heated battle over whether to name the largely black and Hispanic school after Rosa Parks or Cesar Chavez.

Jefferson parent and name-changing advocate Dora Dean Bradley said the naming process at her school is wide open, but she mentioned a few possibilities, including Ohlone Elementary, after the nearby Ohlone Park, and Rose Street Elementary, after a nearby avenue.

“We want to have something more positive now for Berkeley,” Bradley said.

Whatever the final name, opponents raise concerns about a district policy which has elementary schoolchildren weighing in on the process.

“If the kids get set up for it, I know how they’re going to vote,” Broaddus said.

But Beverly Thiele, one of the teachers pushing for a name change, said the vote would be fair.

“We’re certainly not going to go around and grab kids by the collar and say this is what you have to do,” she said.

## Renaming Vote Stirs School

*Matthew Artz*

*Tuesday February 03, 2004*

Thomas Jefferson's legacy in Berkeley may rest on the vote of school children born after William Jefferson Clinton took office.

But not if Jefferson Elementary School Principal Betty Delaney can stop it.

According to Jefferson PTA President Linda Safarik-Tong, Delaney told the PTA that concerns from parents and teachers have led her to seek permission from the Berkeley Unified School District to waive a requirement that students as young as five vote on the controversial drive to strike the name of the author of the Declaration of Independence from the school.

"It's an emotional minefield for students," said Jefferson first grade teacher Marguerite Talley-Hughes, who along with parents and fellow teachers initiated the effort last spring to rename the school so it wouldn't bear the mark of a slaveholder.

District policy requires that proposed name changes first win approval from 20 percent of parents, staff and students at the school.

Last spring advocates for a new name collected signatures from 40 percent of staff and 32 percent of parents—but on the principal's order, students have remained on the sideline.

"My responsibility is to keep [students] safe and out of the process until we formalize what will happen," said Delaney, who refused comment on any intention to request a waiver barring a vote either for all students or for Kindergarten, first-, second- and third graders.

Delaney, who has remained neutral throughout the debate, has faced criticism from parents that the process has been under the radar, and her request for a waiver is clouded in confusion. One parent said he heard "third-hand" that the district had denied the request, while Superintendent Michele Lawrence said Delaney hasn't broached the subject with her.

With enough votes from staff and parents to proceed with a name change, the weight of the process falls on students, with parents on both sides of the debate, but most agreeing that the issue is better suited to fourth- and fifth-graders.

"It could be really good for social studies," said Rachel Chernoff, the mother of a kindergarten student she acknowledged didn't know who Jefferson was.

Mark Piccillo, a parent who opposes the name change and is slated to sit on a newly formed committee to guide the name change process, said he disagreed with some parents he said were pushing for a student vote in hopes of “deep sixing” the proposal.

“When it comes to serious stuff like this, where there are strong feelings and no clear answers, it should be up to the parents,” he said.

Should Jefferson go, he would be the latest in a steady stream of dead white males given the heave-ho from Berkeley schools. Shortly after the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., James Garfield Middle School was renamed in his honor. Abraham Lincoln Elementary became Malcolm X under a groundswell of community support, and just four years ago Christopher Columbus Elementary was rebuilt and renamed after Rosa Parks.

Rosa Parks Parent Liaison Maria Gonzalez said their school followed the rules to a tee, allowing students to vote first on a name change and then on a new name. Although in Rosa Parks’ case there was little controversy over the call for a name change, there was heated debate on whether the new name should honor Parks or Caesar Chavez.

Lawrence said she opposed changing district policy to fit one circumstance and disagreed with those who wanted to keep students out of the debate.

“That’s a dangerous road to go down saying young children can’t be educated on issues that are controversial in nature. I don’t agree with that as a parent or as an educator,” she said.

However, many teachers and parents interviewed said they feared a vote could traumatize students who aren’t emotionally or intellectually mature enough to deal with slavery.

“It would be a very hurtful discussion,” said Beverly Thiele, a second grade teacher at Jefferson and a supporter of the name change. She feared that a vote would put her students at risk of accusations of racism or insensitivity. “It’s OK to include them on future names, but not this,” she said.

If the students must vote, Talley-Hughes insisted the Jefferson debate be presented to them in a forthright manner. “It they are going to be part of the process we must be honest with them. We can’t couch it in terms that cloud the issues at hand.”

District policy doesn’t specify guidelines for a student vote, leaving it up to the school to decide whether or not to teach special lessons on Jefferson before polling the students.

Lawrence envisioned several methods to involve children, including having the principal go to each classroom and explain the issue or calling an assembly that presents both sides of the issue, then allows students who support a name change to sign the petition.

Should 20 percent of students support the name change, the remainder of the process is equally vague. A committee of parents and staff, formed to guide the process, has yet to meet, while the student vote issue remains unresolved.

Ultimately, a new name must receive support from 50 percent of parents, staff and students—and Jefferson's name won't be excluded from the competition, giving hope to some in the Jefferson camp that the ultimately the status quo might survive. "A lot of us want the name kept," Piccillo said. "No one's going to beat Jefferson."

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## Jefferson Students Will Have Final Say on Name Change

By *MATTHEW ARTZ*

*Friday March 12, 2004*

After months of painful debate among parents about letting their young children vote on an issue heavy with racial overtones, students at Jefferson Elementary School will have final say on a controversial petition drive to change the school's name. But they will participate only from the confines of their homes.

With Superintendent Michele Lawrence in attendance, the Jefferson PTA Tuesday averted a showdown at the Board of Education by permitting students to sign a community-driven petition to rename the school so that it doesn't bear the mark of a slave holder.

As required under district policy, the compromise gives a voice to students, even those too young to read the petition. However it takes the student portion of the participation outside of the walls of the school itself, where several parents feared that teachers or fellow students could manipulate the process.

"I'm not comfortable with kids voting here," said Chris Hudson, a parent who offered the compromise. He said the issue had been more divisive than he expected and that he would feel better "if the petition came home and we'd have a chance to discuss it."

In accordance with district rules that require support from 20 percent of parents, staff and students in order to consider changing a school name, opponents of Jefferson last spring collected signatures from 40 percent of parents and 32 percent of staff. However their drive stalled on the issue of taking the petition to students.

Many parents argued that the petition—which holds that as a slaveholder, Jefferson was unfit to be honored by the school—presented issues too complex for young children to grasp fully, and which could potentially lead to strife in classrooms.

Although several parents Tuesday held firm to their contention that seeking student approval for the petition was “nonsensical,” nearly all agreed it was preferable to prolonging the dispute that has virtually paralyzed the PTA.

The nearly unanimous vote to include students came in stark contrast to the February PTA meeting in which parents voted overwhelmingly to petition the school board for a waiver exempting the school from following the district policy. The PTA later backed off that vote at the behest of Superintendent Lawrence, who opposed a waiver. She said other schools, including Rosa Parks Elementary, had followed the name change procedures, and warned that a decision by the board probably wouldn't come until May.

“I'm glad the process is moving forward,” said Derrick Miller, a parent who has questioned the name change.

Had the dispute not been resolved this school year, the names of parents whose children graduate in June would have been disqualified, potentially causing the process to start from scratch.

With the agreement now in place, Principal Betty Delaney will send the petition to students' homes along with a letter to parents explaining its significance. Teachers will devise lessons on Jefferson in the weeks leading up to the mailing, she said.

If 20 percent of students return a signed petition, as expected, a committee consisting of parents and staff will devise a process for selecting alternative names.

Delaney said the committee would eventually select one or two names to compete with Jefferson in a final vote. The name that wins the votes of more than 50 percent of parents, staff and students will be submitted to the school board for official approval.

Parents on both sides of the debate had reservations about the compromise, but expressed relief the dispute over the student vote was behind them.

Kevin Adkinson said he would have liked to see the vote and debate more “out in the open.” Bernhard Leidewigt agreed that the dispute made for a good learning opportunity, but maintained that the decision should be left to parents and staff. “It's appropriate for students to be involved in the discussion,” he said. “What's not appropriate is for students to make judgments based on historical knowledge they don't have.”

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## Eight New Names Offered for Jefferson School

By MATTHEW ARTZ

*Friday March 25, 2005*

After two years of fierce debate, the parents, students and staff of Jefferson Elementary School will decide if they want their building to continue to bear the name of a slaveholder.

Earlier this week Jefferson Principal Betty Delaney released a list of eight names for the school community to vote on in an election scheduled for early April. The top vote getter will then be placed in a runoff election against Jefferson in late May.

“I’m for getting the name Jefferson off the school,” said Dora Dean Bradley, the parent of a third grader. “I don’t care that he wrote the Declaration of Independence. He didn’t write it for me.”

Bradley served on an oversight committee of parents and teachers that sifted through name change suggestions offered by students and parents.

The proposed names include four people: Cesar Chavez; Ralph Bunche, a Nobel Prize winning African-American diplomat and graduate of Jefferson High School in Los Angeles; Sojourner Truth, a freed slave who became a leader in the abolitionist movement, and Florence McDonald, a former city councilmember and the mother of Berkeley musician Country Joe McDonald. Other proposals are Ohlone, Peace, Rose and Sequoia.

The oversight committee rejected one suggested name, Wavy Gravy Elementary, in honor of the Berkeley-based artist.

“We were hesitant to propose someone who was still alive, because we didn’t want someone who could still make a mistake,” said Chris Hudson, a parent who also served on the oversight committee.

Not everyone is in favor of a name change. Hudson said he remains cool to changing the school’s name. “I don’t think the name change process should have started at all,” he said. “There are many more important school issues to deal with.”

Berkeley has a history of changing school names. Shortly after the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., James Garfield Middle School was renamed in his honor. Abraham Lincoln Elementary became Malcolm X under a groundswell of community support, and four years ago Christopher Columbus Elementary was rebuilt and renamed after Rosa Parks.

In 2003, supporters of renaming the school collected signatures from more than 20 percent of parents and teachers. Last year, more than 20 percent of students also voted to move ahead with the name change, a move which triggered the formation of the committee.

Some parents and teachers have been leery of having younger students vote on an issue that they fear they might be unable to grasp fully, but Superintendent Michele Lawrence has insisted that the school follow district policy and allow all students to vote.

“That’s a dangerous road to go down saying young children can’t be educated on issues that are controversial in nature. I don’t agree with that as a parent or as an educator,” she said previously.

According to a letter from Principal Delaney, over the next two weeks students will attend assemblies and have classroom discussions on the proposed names, while parents will receive a voter information packet. A town hall meeting with historians discussing Jefferson is planned for before the final vote in May.

While Bradley said she was leaning towards Ohlone Elementary, she expected her daughter and many of her classmates to choose Cesar Chavez. “They’ve all studied him, it’s a name they are all familiar with,” she said.

Country Joe McDonald was in Italy, his wife said, and not available to comment on his mother’s nomination for the school. As for Wavy Gravy, he said he won’t be mounting a write-in campaign. “I never though I stood a chance,” he said. “All they have to do is Google me and there’s my checkered past. It’s enough to be an ice cream flavor.”

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## Sequoia To Vie for School Name By J. DOUGLAS ALLEN-TAYLOR

*Friday May 06, 2005*



Sequoia has beaten out second-place Ohlone and six other alternatives for the chance to replace the name of Thomas Jefferson Elementary School, according to the results of a school-wide vote.

Jefferson Elementary School principal Betty Delaney reportedly described the vote as a “very close count.”

The vote on the possible name change of the Ada Street school was proposed by parents and community activists who were concerned that the Berkeley school was named for a man who held slaves on his 18th century Virginia plantation. The issue has sparked controversy in Berkeley, with Jefferson supporters arguing that the nation’s third president should continue to be honored because of his authorship of the Declaration of Independence and the purchase of the vast Louisiana Territory from France, paving the way to make America an ocean-to-ocean empire.

The first round of voting focused on choosing an alternative name to Jefferson. Sequoia won the first round over the names of Ohlone, Cesar Chavez, Ralph Bunche, Sojourner Truth, Florence McDonald (a former city councilmember), Peace, and Rose.

A second round of voting by Jefferson Elementary parents, students, and staff—this one to decide whether to keep the Jefferson name or replace it with Sequoia—will be held during the week of May 23, with results expected to be reported shortly afterward.

According to Berkeley Unified School District Public Information Office Mark Coplan, if the Jefferson Elementary community chooses Sequoia over Thomas Jefferson, the name change will most likely go to the BUSD Board for consideration in June.

The Jefferson Elementary administration has planned a school community meeting for May 17, 6-8 p.m., to discuss the procedures for the final vote.

## Commentary: Jefferson School: What's the Rush?

*Tuesday June 14, 2005*

Suddenly the proposal to change the name of Berkeley's Jefferson School because Thomas Jefferson was a slaveholder is at full boil. First broached over a year ago, the idea seems to have lain fallow until about a month ago. In a very short time the process for deciding the question has leapt forward with virtually breakneck velocity.

The proposed change may be the right thing for Berkeley. Our community—and most particularly our children—may gain more than will be lost if we make such a change. Or maybe not. In any case, the question has already had its “first reading” at the School Board, where the decision will ultimately be made.

There are some, I know, who feel as I do that such a decision should engage the larger Berkeley community—not just that tiny minority who happen today to be directly affiliated with Jefferson School. It would be well for the School Board to hear from them pronto. The accelerated clock hasn't quite made the decision for us yet. The larger community, including the current “Jefferson School community” and, importantly, the School Board, deserve the time to achieve a fuller understanding of this complex issue than I think has been possible to date.

When I first learned of the proposal last year, I prefaced some published comments (Berkeley Daily Planet, March 2-4, 2004) by noting that the shame felt by those whose ancestors held slaves must be nothing beside the pain of those whose ancestors were slaves. This is a reality that I believe Americans considering this difficult subject should never forget. Indeed, the dark legacy of slavery is a subject we neglect at our peril.

The process for deciding the name-change question would certainly have interested Jefferson himself, champion of democracy that he was. What is that process?

Following some internal deliberations at the school but apparently without any organized informational process or effort to engage the broader Berkeley community, a poll of the school's current teachers, students, and their families was held in April to select a favored alternative in the event that the name-change proposal were to go forward. The name “Sequoia” was selected from a list of other alternatives.

Finally, on May 17, with minimal publicity, an “informational” meeting was held at the school.

Out of my interest in the subject, I attended that meeting, the stated goal of which was to provide “An opportunity to have thoughtful, inclusive, and informative discussion on a provocative question, and to hear as many divergent perspectives as possible within the timeframe.” The agenda promised 15 minutes each for prepared presentations by those favoring “Changing the name to Sequoia” and those favoring “Keeping the current name: Jefferson.” Not surprisingly the meeting was largely an occasion for those who favor renaming the school to air their case against Jefferson.

Those favoring the change offered a well-prepared and moving case based on Jefferson’s ownership of slaves and on their impression that he had not acted to end slavery. In their 15 minutes they quoted from Jefferson’s own account of his ordering an offending slave flogged and from writers who have faulted Jefferson for not acting effectively to end slavery. At the core of their presentation were the strong feelings of a teacher at the school, who regards the school’s name as an affront to herself and to all members of the school community who are black. There is of course no arguing with feelings, and hers are shared by several others—both white and black—who endorsed her position.

The 15 minutes allotted to “keeping the current name” were wholly given to Robin Einhorn, a rather antic UC historian, who breezily announced at the outset that she did not intend to “make the case for Jefferson” but informed her listeners that those who make that case base it on the Declaration of Independence. She misinformed them that the Declaration was written not by Jefferson but “by a committee,” read from the Declaration, and—perhaps six minutes into her allotted 15—sat down. It was by any standard a feeble gesture, veering witlessly close to mocking the gravity of the subject. Although there were several there who favored “keeping the current name,” the occasion’s organizers had not secured anyone to prepare that case and in the considerable time remaining for that purpose none were invited to extemporize it.

In the wake of the meeting’s oddly unbalanced presentation, it was, naturally, difficult for those who favor keeping the name to speak out. Most of those attending are not scholars of the subject and had doubtless come simply hoping for some information.

They might of course have been told the truth—that Jefferson did in fact write the Declaration of Independence, that its final form does indeed embody a number of revisions by the committee of which he was a member as well as by the full Continental Congress, that among their revisions were the removal of Jefferson’s language calling for an end to the slave trade. They might have been told that Jefferson wrote and supported legislation against slavery on numerous occasions throughout his life, probably more deliberate legislative efforts in that cause than were made by any of his contemporary “founding fathers.” “This abomination must have an end,” he wrote. “And there is a superior bench reserved in heaven for those who hasten it.” They might have been told that Jefferson regarded slavery as an “abominable crime,” an “infamous practice,” that he agonized over his having inherited a role in the “evil” system and declared that “there is not a man on earth who would sacrifice more than I would to relieve us from this heavy reproach in

any practicable way.” They might have been told that Jefferson felt that by taking unilateral action—freeing his slaves—he would merely diminish his own influence without achieving the broader purpose of universal emancipation, that so long as slavery persisted his duty was to work where he could for “the deliverance of these, our suffering brethren,” and to “endeavor, with those whom fortune has thrown on our hands, to feed and clothe them well, protect them from all ill usage, [and] require such reasonable labor only as is performed voluntarily by freemen.”

Those attending the meeting might have been reminded that it was Jefferson who insisted that the U.S. Constitution include a Bill of Rights, that the very processes that have most dramatically moved our democracy forward—including such landmark achievements as the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965—grew directly out of Thomas Jefferson’s thought, his insistence on broadening democratic institutions at every opportunity. They might have been reminded that Jefferson’s words were tellingly invoked by both Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King in their struggles for racial equality, Lincoln most famously in the Gettysburg Address (1863), King exactly a century later in his “Letter from Birmingham Jail” (1963).

Would such facts have counterbalanced the facts about Jefferson the slaveholder and the strongly expressed feelings of those favoring the change? It’s hard to say. In public discourse feelings have a way of trumping facts.

Less than a week after the meeting the “Jefferson School community”—again consisting only of current students, their families, and teachers at the school—were asked to choose between retaining the name Jefferson or exchanging it for Sequoia. The larger Berkeley community—interested citizens in general, including former Jefferson students, parents, and teachers—were not asked their views.

What should our larger Berkeley community, which devotes so much time and energy to encouraging fair and open process, do about this? For over two hundred years Thomas Jefferson has been generally regarded as the world’s leading apostle of democracy. It seems at the very least worth noting how shabbily democracy was served on this occasion.

And what about the feelings of those like the Jefferson School teacher who so movingly stated her case? I think we honor those feelings by doing all we can to create an educational climate that acknowledges the complexity of human experience. The case of Jefferson is not simple. It does a severe injustice to our children to lead them to think so. As thoughtful citizens, as parents, as teachers, we have a job to do. The job is not to hand our children a politically correct point of view. The job is to help them open their minds to realities, even to sometimes contradictory, painful, ambiguous, or conflicting realities, to help them to think for themselves. That is the job that Thomas Jefferson foresaw when—as the first statesman to do so, not just in the US but in the world—he promoted universal publicly supported education as an essential foundation of democracy. In his lifetime he failed to bring that vision to fruition, just as he failed to develop a workable plan for universal emancipation. It is foolish, and dishonest, not to honor him for the

attempt, just as we honor him for so much else that is best in our imperfect but not perhaps utterly hopeless heritage.

All this leaves us with some questions:

- Should the name-change process involve only those who happen to be associated with the school at a given time or should it involve the larger Berkeley community?
- Should the only “informational” public meeting about the name-change question be held at the end rather than at the beginning of such a process?
- What role, if any, should children in kindergarten through fifth grade play in the process?
- If the contemporary—and temporary—“Jefferson School community” is indeed the appropriately exclusive group for deliberating on the question, should they be given balanced information and more than a week in which to come to a decision?
- Should the School Board give itself time—say six months or so—to hear from the wider community, in hopes of understanding all the issues on a very complex question, before concluding this process?

Changing the name of Jefferson School to that of a tree would certainly not be the worst thing Berkeley ever did. It may even be the right thing to do. But to do it on the basis of partial or wrong information or out of a process that lacks broad-based community consideration would, I think, be unwise.

Rob Browning is a Berkeley resident and former editor of UC Berkeley’s Mark Twain Paper

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## School Board Postpones Jefferson Name Change

By J DOUGLAS ALLEN-TAYLOR

*Friday June 10, 2005*

The Jefferson Elementary School name controversy did not end with the decision by Jefferson parents/guardians, school staff, and students to change the school’s name to Sequoia.

On Wednesday members of the Board of Directors of the Berkeley Unified School District indicated that they were as divided as they could be on whether or not to accept the name change. And with the district asking for public input before a vote in two weeks, the conflict could escalate.

It was the first time the board weighed in on the name change. Board President Nancy Riddle said, “The board did not want to meddle in the process while it was being decided at the school site.”

The Jefferson name controversy began two years ago when a group of parents, guardians, and Jefferson staff petitioned the district to change the school’s name.

“Thomas Jefferson is revered as the primary author of one of the world’s most respected and beloved documents,” the petition read. “Jefferson is also a man who held as many as 150 African and African-American men, women and children in bondage, denying them the very rights which he had asserted for all in the Declaration of Independence.”

The petition continued, “A school name which fails to acknowledge or respect the depth and importance of their people’s collective sorrow is personally offensive. ... It is time to consider a name which unites us as a community.”

The Jefferson School community voted last month to change the school’s name to Sequoia. Students and staff voted to change the school’s name by wide margins. The vote among parents and guardians was closer, 67 to 61 to change the name.

The school vote is a recommendation that must be approved by the school board.

At Wednesday’s meeting, Board Vice President Terry Doran and Director John Selawsky indicated that they would probably vote to approve the name change, while directors Joaquin Rivera and Shirley Issel said they would vote against it. Riddle said she had not yet made up her mind.

Riddle said that since she lives near Jefferson School, there is a chance that the California Fair Political Practices Commission might ask her to recuse herself if the name change would have an economic effect on her property.

Riddle said that she was “horribly conflicted” on the name change.

“I admire Jefferson’s legacy on education,” she said. “Most of my heroes have stood on his shoulders in that area, and most of the work I do in this district is inspired by him. But this is a board that respects the community process unless we don’t think the outcome is good for the general community.”

Riddle also answered critics who have said that the name change discussion was a “waste of time” during a period when the district is struggling to make ends meet.

“I think it’s good that we live in Berkeley and are having these kinds of discussions,” she said. “I think it’s very healthy.”

The sharpest comments came from Issel, who accused name change supporters of “holding hostage our educational institutions by emotional terrorism.”

She said, “I don’t find your arguments compelling. I find them offensive. I pray to God that none of you are judged by the standards that you’ve used to judge this situation. Somehow you’ve located the source of your discomfort, and you have decided that by changing the name of the school you’ll become more comfortable. I don’t think that will happen.”

Issel said she agreed that “it is troubling to all of us that Jefferson held slaves,” but the district should recognize that “all of us are less than perfect. Our Founding Fathers were less than perfect.”

Rivera said he would give his reasons for opposing the name change at the next board meeting, when the board votes.

While neither Selawsky or Doran indicated their position on Wednesday night on the propriety of a Berkeley school named after Thomas Jefferson, both said they believed that the board vote should reflect the will of the Jefferson community.

“My opinion of Jefferson is irrelevant,” Selawsky said. “The board vote should not be an endorsement of the school name, it should be based on whether or not the school community followed the board policy in reaching this vote.... From what I’ve heard so far, the policy was followed in this instance.”

Selawsky noted—and other board members agreed—that the district’s name change policy itself may be flawed, and needs to be reconsidered.

Complaints had been raised both on the board and in the Jefferson community that the school parent/guardian vote is restricted to parents and guardians of present school students, leaving out others who have had long association with the school.

Complaints have also been made that early elementary school children aren’t equipped to make an informed decision on a school name change.

“My five year old nephew told me he voted for Ralph Bunche as the school name because it sounded like one of his favorite cereals, Honey Bunches of Oats,” said a parent who opposed the Jefferson name change. “Is that any way to run a school district?”

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## School Board Plans Hearing, Vote on Jefferson Name Change By J. DOUGLAS ALLEN-TAYLOR

*Tuesday June 21, 2005*

Two years after a group of Jefferson Elementary School parents and teachers began circulating a petition to change the school's name because of Thomas Jefferson's connection to slavery, the general Berkeley public will get its first—and only—opportunity to officially enter the process when the BUSD Board of Education holds a public hearing on the issue prior to Wednesday night's regular board meeting.

While public comment on the issue has been widespread throughout the city—including in the letters pages of the Daily Planet—official input has been confined so far to a narrowly defined Jefferson School community.

The hearing will begin at 6:30 p.m. at the Old City Hall on Martin Luther King Jr. Way in downtown Berkeley. Under Berkeley Unified's facilities name-change policy, the board makes the final decision on proposed name changes following a vote by members of the current school community at the individual school: students, staff members, and parents and guardians of present students. The vote will be held during the board's regular meeting, scheduled to begin at 7:45 p.m.

At the end of last month, current Jefferson School community members voted to change the school's name to Sequoia. Some people have suggested that the name referred to a 19th century Georgia Cherokee leader and inventor named Sequoya—also known as George Guess—who developed the Cherokee alphabet. However, school officials and literature distributed during the voting process both indicate that the proposed new name was intended to represent the giant California tree.

Board members were evenly divided on the name change when the issue first came to them at their last meeting, with Board Vice President Terry Doran and Director John Selawsky indicating that they would respect the vote of the school community to change the name, and Directors Shirley Issel and Joaquin Rivera saying they would oppose the name change. Board President Nancy Riddle said she had not yet made up her mind.

Board members are also divided as to what criteria should be used to uphold or deny the proposed Jefferson Elementary name change. Selawsky said at the last meeting that the board's only function should be to certify whether the school community properly followed the district's name-change policy. Rivera countered that the board's function in the name change is “more than just an automatic process; it's within the board's discretion to vote it up or down.”

The policy itself is silent on that issue, stating only that once a name-change petition has been received, “the board will act on the petition.”

In her report to the Board, Superintendent Michele Lawrence said she “can certify to the board that there were no violations of [the name change] policy” during the school's vote. “The superintendent believes the steps outlined in the present policy have been followed as required...”

Lawrence called the district's name-change policy itself "significantly flawed," and board members on both sides of the Jefferson name change issue have indicated that once the Jefferson change is decided, the board will move forward with changes to that policy. Among the complaints received is that the district's policy allows K-3 elementary school children to vote on proposed school name changes, while excluding—among others—school alumni, parents of students who have graduated from the school, and residents of the school neighborhood.

Board President Riddle said that board members had decided not to make changes while the Jefferson name change campaign was ongoing for fear of being accused of trying to sway the school community vote one way or the other.

Budget matters are also scheduled to take up much of the board's attention Wednesday night.

As earlier promised—or warned—the superintendent's office is recommending reductions in the Berkeley High athletic program. The \$25,000 in recommended General Fund cuts—in overtime and stipends for coaches of some freshman teams—are expected to be partially offset by an expected \$20,000 grant award from the independent nonprofit Berkeley Athletic Fund.

Also at Wednesday's meeting, the Board will release to the public the proposed contract settlement agreements with its five employee unions, and will take its first public look at the proposed district budget for fiscal year 2005-06.

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## Board Vetoes Jefferson School Name Change

By J. DOUGLAS ALLEN-TAYLOR

*Friday June 24, 2005*

Following dramatic remarks by a clearly conflicted Board President Nancy Riddle, the Berkeley Unified School District Board of Directors voted 3-2 Wednesday night to deny a petition to change the name of Jefferson Elementary School to Sequoia.

Her voice breaking up and visibly close to tears, Riddle told a hushed crowd that "I know that I will be disappointing some people who I care about, but I can't support this." Riddle's succeeding no vote on the petition broke the 2-2 deadlock on the board that was known two weeks ago when the remaining board members publicly announced how they would vote on the issue.

As expected, Board Vice President Terry Doran and director John Selawsky voted to accept the results of the Jefferson vote, while directors Shirley Issel and Joaquin Rivera voted against the proposed name change. The vote followed an hour-long hearing that preceded the board meeting,

along with another half-hour of public comment time during the meeting itself that was dominated by supporters and opponents of the name change.

The decision rejected a district-authorized vote held during the last week in May that saw the name Sequoia beat out Jefferson among students, staff, and parents and guardians at the school.

Division over whether the board should honor the results of that school community vote was reflected in the board vote itself. Selawsky and Doran argued that the board's name change policy only gave the board the latitude to determine if the petition process had been properly followed. Riddle, Rivera, and Issel all said that the board had the discretion to accept or reject the school community vote using the criteria of whether the name change was best for Berkeley as a whole.

Berkeley's difficulty in coming to a decision on the emotionally charged issue was summed up by long-time Berkeley political and environmental activist Elliot Cohen, who said he was torn on what to do about the proposed name change from the slaveowning father of American democracy to a stately California tree. "I like trees," Cohen told board members. "I don't like slavery. I like Jefferson." He put up his hands in a gesture of uncertainty.

Supporters of the name change in attendance at the board meeting appeared to outnumber opponents by a large margin.

During the public presentations, each side accused the other side of engaging in tactics of intimidation.

Carrie Adams, a white Jefferson parent and a name-change opponent, said that she had not participated in much of the two-year name-change discussions at Jefferson because "I felt intimidated. I have been held emotionally hostage, and I'm not the only one who feels this way." She said that Jefferson school community members who did not support the name change were accused of racism, and "I am not a racist. I abhor slavery. But anyone who can look 200 years in the past and pass judgment, it's like armchair quarterbacking. When do we move on?" Calling the name-change campaign "a disaster," Adams said that "it has pulled apart something that was together."

That was countered by Maggie Riddle, a white Jefferson teacher and a name-change proponent, who said that she "felt intimidated as a teacher advocate for this change. Two weeks ago in these same chambers, I was called an emotional terrorist. Supporters of the name change have received threatening e-mails and veiled threats. After I announced my support for the name change, many of my fellow teachers stopped talking to me." Riddle added that "if anybody has been the victim of emotional terrorism and intimidation in this country, it's been the African-American and the Native American community."

Supporters and opponents also sparred over whether adoption of the name change would signal a diminishing of both Jefferson as a historical figure and Jefferson's ideas in Berkeley's education process.

"We don't name things after people to celebrate those people," Bruce Poropat said. "We name them as a way of recognizing their role in history. And no one had more of a role in American history than Jefferson. We need to preserve our history, good or bad."

And Barbara Wittstock, who said she attended the Jefferson-founded University of Virginia, said that "if you start doing name changes" solely on the basis of the holding of slaves, "you might end up with teachers refusing to teach the Declaration of Independence" because it was written by a slaveholder.

But Deborah Ager, a Jefferson parent, said that "no one has suggested that we launder our history. No one has said that we shouldn't teach continue to teach about Jefferson. No one has said that we not teach the Declaration of Independence." And other name-change supporters argued that in honoring the Jefferson school community's democratic vote to change the school's name, the board would be honoring Jefferson's ideal of respecting democracy.

The board's rejection vote set off an emotional scene in the council chambers at Old City Hall that simultaneously captured both the beauty and the bitter divisiveness of the failed two-year attempt to change the school name. As soon as the vote was announced, many of the disappointed supporters of the proposed name change stood and sang the civil rights standard "We Shall Overcome," holding lime green printed flyers reading "Support Democracy. Approve Sequoia." Already beginning a victory celebration, at least one opponent of the name change turned to the supporters and sang back, derisively, "Get over it."

Meanwhile, other name-change supporters stormed out of the chambers, berating board members as they left. "Unbelievable! Unbelievable!" one supporter said, over and over. "An almost all-white board has told African-Americans that you only want to hear from us what you want us to say," an African-American teacher told anyone who was willing to listen, including name change opponents who shouted back, "All African-Americans don't support changing the school's name." A white-haired African-American man shook his finger at board members and declared, several times, "White people win! Niggers lose! That's the message." BUSD Public Information Officer Mark Coplan ran and placed himself between the board dais and another name-change supporter, Zachary Running Wolf, leading to a heated exchange between the two men. Short, sharp arguments broke out between supporters and opponents, both inside the chambers and outside in the hallway as both sides filed out. One young Jefferson student, who had spoken in favor of the name change, was led out in tears. With the board meeting itself halted for almost 15 minutes by the display, several board members—among them board vice president Terry Doran and director Shirley Issel—left their seats at the dais to walk among the slowly dispersing crowd, holding calming conversations.

Through it all, the singing of “We Shall Overcome” through several stanzas continued for many minutes.

When the name change petition came to the board two weeks ago Riddle had indicated that she was divided on the issue, and that internal conflict was evident throughout her remarks. “I knew when the petition first appeared two years ago that it was going to be a difficult decision,” she said, “mostly because of my ties to Jefferson.” Riddle, whose children attended the school, had said two weeks ago that much of her educational philosophy was based upon Jefferson’s work. She added that “I’ve gone back on forth on what my decision will be several times in the last two weeks” and, in fact, appeared to be still wavering even as she spoke.

In the end, she said her mind was made up by the fact that her children had attended schools named after both Thomas Jefferson and black nationalist leader Malcolm X, both of whom she called “flawed.” “I think the juxtaposition of these two men is important,” she said. “I think our children will benefit from studying these complex men.”›

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## Jefferson Name-Change Debate Continues as New Rules Studied By J. DOUGLAS ALLEN-TAYLOR

Tuesday July 05, 2005

One week after the contentious and narrowly rejected petition to change the name of Jefferson Elementary School split both the Berkeley School Board and the Berkeley community in general, the board voted unanimously Wednesday night to rescind the district’s school renaming policy until a new policy can be worked out.

The job of writing a new policy now goes to the Board Policy Committee, which consists of Vice President Terry Doran and Director Shirley Issel. Doran voted to support the Jefferson name change petition while Issel voted to reject it.

BUSD Superintendent Michele Lawrence said that Miriam Rokeach, president of the nonprofit Center for Youth Development through Law of the UC Berkeley School of Law, will be hired as a consultant to assist in the new policy development.

Once the new policy proposal is written, it will be submitted to the board for discussion and approval. No timetable was given for that action, but Lawrence estimated that with the board out for a month-long summer break, consideration of the new policy is likely to take place sometime in the early fall.

Meanwhile, no new school name change petitions can be initiated in the district.

Board President Nancy Riddle said she expected the committee to “survey other schools and come back with a variety of alternatives that we can weigh.”

Director Joaquin Rivera said that he thought the 20 percent threshold to initiate a school name change “might be too low.” Under present policy, the name change process is initiated by a petition signed by 20 percent of present school constituents.

Rivera also said that while he had no concrete suggestions on how the new policy should be written, he said it should answer complaints—voiced during the Jefferson debate—that the larger Berkeley community, including the board itself, is left out of the debate until a short period at the end.

When the Jefferson issue finally came to the board two weeks ago, President Riddle said that board members had “specifically kept out of the debate” in order not to be seen as influencing the initial vote by Jefferson Elementary staff, students, and parents and guardians.

“There should be room for earlier board input,” Rivera said Wednesday night. “And we should somehow involve the larger community. The community owns the schools, and have a vested interest in the outcome.”

The question of what constitutes a “school community” was pursued by Director John Selawsky.

Under the now-suspended district policy, the board makes the final decision on a proposed name change only after an initial vote by what is called the “school community” of the school directly affected. That “school community” is narrowly defined as present students and staff at the school, and parents or guardians of presently-enrolled students.

“The Jefferson vote raised the question of what constitutes a school community,” Selawsky said. “In all of our other processes that affect a particular school, we always bring in the surrounding neighborhood for input. Don’t they also have a stake in the school name?” Selawsky also said that he “wasn’t sure” that the school community should be confined to people who are connected to the school at the time of the vote, a definition that leaves out school alumni. Selawsky said that he did not yet have any answers for how that might be done practically. “I don’t have any answers for that,” he said.

Student Director Lily Dorman-Colby said that while it is easy to define students, staff, and parents or guardians, deciding who constituted the school’s neighborhood community would be infinitely harder.

“How much weight will be given to neighborhood organizations?” she asked. “And how will we reach people who might have an interest, but don’t necessarily attend meetings?”

Only Vice President Doran said he didn’t necessarily advocate many changes being made in the name change policy.

“I’m not very disturbed by our present policy,” Doran said. He only suggested that the policy should delineate what criteria the board should use for upholding or denying the vote taken by the school community. In the case of the Jefferson vote, Doran and Selawsky voted to uphold the Jefferson decision, stating that their only criteria should be to determine whether the school vote properly followed policy. In denying the Jefferson vote, directors Riddle, Issel, and Rivera said that the board should take the school opinion under advisement, but should retain the right to cast their own vote based upon whether or not they felt the school name change was best for the district.

“I think the vote of the school community should supersede any other advice we receive,” Doran said. “The decision rightfully resides in the present participants at the school. That should be the heart and soul of the decision.”

But Doran agreed with other board members that the decision should be made with input from the larger community, and that input should come earlier in the process. “The larger community should get the chance during the period when the issue is being debated within the school itself,” Doran argued, “rather than only during the pressure-cooker of the intense, hour-long debate when the board is making the final decision.”

Doran said following the meeting that the new name change policy should make more provision for formal community presentations to school community members on a proposed name change before the school community takes its vote.